

QUT Digital Repository:
<http://eprints.qut.edu.au/>



This is the published version of the following review:

[Cantrell, Kate](#) (2009) Thelma and disease : Susan Gilman's
Undress Me in the Temple of Heaven. *M/C Reviews*.
(Published online 28 June 2009)

© Copyright 2009 Kate Cantrell



Welcome kc!

[Home](#) [Your Account](#) [Submit Review](#) [Top 10](#)

MAIN MENU

- [M/C Reviews](#)
- ['events'](#)
- ['screens'](#)
- ['sounds'](#)
- ['style'](#)
- ['words'](#)
- [Feature Issues](#)
- [What's On](#)
- [Your Account](#)
- [Send Reviews](#)
- [Statistics](#)
- [Top 10](#)

WHO'S ONLINE

There are currently, 75
guest(s) and 7 member(s) that
are online.

You are logged as **kc**.
You have **0** private message(s).

TOTAL HITS

We have received
9568125
page views since September
2002

SYNDICATION

[XML](#)Travel Writing: Susan Gilman's *Undress Me in the Temple of Heaven*

Posted on Sunday, June 28 @ 22:13:52 EST by [tim milfull](#)

KC writes:

Reviewed by Kate Cantrell

In the nineteenth century, when female travel stories were still read as excursions rather than expeditions, it was common for women travellers to preface their writing with an apology or admission of guilt—a type of disclaimer that excused the author for engaging in such inappropriate activity. Susan Gilman's *Undress Me in the Temple of Heaven* offers no such thing. Instead Gilman begins her memoir with a confession about its lack of spin. "This is a true story," she writes, "recounted as accurate as possible and corroborated by notes I took at the time and by others who were present".

Undress Me is the travel account of Gilman and her friend Clare Van Houten; two classmates, essentially strangers, who decide at 4am on one idle morning to backpack around the world together. Drunk and directionless, the self-described "typical twenty-one-year-olds" make their decision, impulsively, at the International House of Pancakes, just fifteen days before graduating from Brown. "Staring at the hotcakes and waffles, we'd had a jolt of inspiration. Why not eat pancakes of many nations in many nations?" (10). "Like most ideas", Gilman confesses, "ours had begun stupidly" (9).

This light wit and soft lyricism that underpins the opening chapters has all but dissolved by the final pages. After spells of turbulence, both textual and literal, the pair touch down in Kai Tak Airport in the middle of 1986, a time when "Communist China had been open to independent backpackers for about all of ten minutes" (2). Determined to be travellers rather than tourists, but clueless to any real distinctions, the pair find themselves strangers in a strange land, unsure about China's dusty, alien streets and unsettled by their strange encounters with locals. "We didn't know one soul in the entire hemisphere. We'd landed in Asia without a single name on a napkin. No friend-of-a-friend's cousin teaching English. No army buddy of her father's. No Brown alumnus to call in case of an emergency" (13).

As if on cue, the narrative takes an unexpected turn when Claire starts acting "strangely". Suddenly, both women find themselves in an abstracted *cul de sac* from which there is no real chance of escape. On route from Beijing to Hong Kong, Claire becomes increasingly ill and paranoid. She suffers hallucinatory fevers which result in a seemingly unexplainable breakdown; one in which she is convinced the CIA, FBI and even the Mossad are tracking her travels. Unable to speak the language, and unsure what to do next, the pair's plans for a grand, giddy expedition quickly derail. In the end, we are left with a cataclysmic collision of naive idealism and unwavering reality. Cutting their trip short and flying home, Clare's boyfriend finally calls Gilman for answers. "No one wants to hear the truth," he says. "But if anyone's ever going to really help Clare, someone needs to know" (291). Here, readers are privy to a delicate moment, as Gilman describes Clare's "secret forays to do business in Beijing, her fear of other tourists, her bizarre attempt to give away her broken camera, her lying down like a corpse in the middle of the rice paddy", and then, "the final, horrible, pronounced denouement" (291).

Unlike many contemporary female travel writers, Gilman insists she does not embellish her story. She rarely flinches in her telling. Instead, she presents a portrait of two young, brilliant women, in all their "nakedness, fallibility and confusion" (291). For this reason, *Undress Me* should not be dismissed as another cheesy travel account of "finding yourself" or "going your own way". This is a story about internalising borders rather than crossing them. Indeed the possibility arises that one may not have to leave home in order to travel.

[Undress Me in the Temple of Heaven](#)
(2009)

by Susan Jane Gilman
[Grand Central Publishing](#)
ISBN: 9780446578929
320pp AUD\$23.99

RELATED LINKS

- [Bookseller: Avid Reader](#)
- [Bookseller: Coaldrakes](#)
- [Bookseller: Folio Books](#)
- [Bookseller: American Bookstore](#)
- [Bookseller: Riverbend Books](#)
- [Bookseller: Bent Books](#)
- [Bookseller: Mary Ryan](#)
- [Bookseller: Borders](#)
- [Publisher: Allen & Unwin](#)
- [Publisher: Ashgate](#)
- [Publisher: Black Inc Books](#)
- [Publisher: Duke University](#)
- [Publisher: Footprint Books](#)
- [Publisher: Fordham University](#)
- [Publisher: Hachette Livre](#)
- [Publisher: Macmillan](#)
- [Publisher: Melbourne Universit](#)
- [Publisher: MIT Press](#)
- [Publisher: NYU Press](#)
- [Publisher: Omnibus Press](#)
- [Publisher: Penguin Books](#)
- [Publisher: Pluto Press](#)
- [Publisher: Random House](#)
- [Publisher: Scribe](#)
- [Publisher: Spinifex Press](#)
- [Publisher: Uni of Minnesota](#)
- [Publisher: Uni of Mississippi](#)
- [Publisher: Uni of Queensland](#)
- [Publisher: UNSW Press](#)
- [Criticism: Atlantic Monthly](#)
- [Criticism: London Review](#)
- [Criticism: New Republic](#)
- [Criticism: New York Review](#)
- [Criticism: New York Times](#)
- [Criticism: Review of Contempor](#)
- [Criticism: Salon](#)
- [Criticism: Spectator](#)
- [Criticism: Sydney Morning Her](#)
- [Criticism: Times](#)
- [Criticism: Village Voice](#)
- [Criticism: Wall Street Journal](#)
- [Criticism: Washington Post](#)
- [Criticism: Metacritic](#)
- [More about 'words'](#)
- [News by tim milfull](#)

Most Popular 'words'
Review:

[Pornotopian Studies: Sex Ed: Film, Video, and the Framework of Desire](#)

ARTICLE RATING

Average Score: **0**
Votes: **0**

Please take a second and vote
for this article:

☐ ★★★★★
☐ ★★★★★
☐ ★★★★★
☐ ★★★★★
☐ ★★★★★

[Cast my Vote!](#)